



SHE SAT in a rocking chair and looked down on the street. She didn't see the children playing, and the trickle of traffic made no conscious impression on her.

Though the day was hot, she had a thin shawl draped over her bony shoulders. She rocked slowly, her faded blue eyes fixed on nebulous nothings.

It came to her again along the dim channels of memory that she was an old woman. It had seemed to happen overnight. Surely it was only yesterday Mr. Bates had come home—she remembered with yearning the little house in Westfield—and told her she got more beautiful every day. Surely it was only yesterday Walter had told her in the clear high tones of childhood that she was the best mother on the block.

Those and kindred events were sharply etched in her recollections. What had happened since Mr. Bates died was blurred. Walter had grown up, but she had no clear picture of the young man he had become. She

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thought of Walter a great deal these days, when she could get no sewing to do for her neighbors.

She sat and rocked, and looked at nothing, and remembered the little boy of eight who had to be threatened before he would wash his knees. The little boy who came crying to her when older boys pushed him around. The little boy who kept her busy all day picking up after him.

Her thoughts shied away from Walter growing up, Walter getting into trouble.

It was normal, no doubt. He'd always been high-spirited, curious, like all people with fine, sensitive natures, he had wanted to know about things. He hadn't had the judgment that comes with experience and maturity; it was to be expected that he would stray from lawful paths.

But all that was over. He had a good job in Pittsburgh, now, and soon she could start thinking of him in the present, just as soon as he made good on his job.

He must, this time.

by

ROBERT TALLMAN



The sound of whistling gradually penetrated her consciousness, and as the familiar tune was identified by her reluctant mind, she caught her breath sharply.

She crossed the room, put out a shaking hand, snatched it away from the doorknob. She wanted to know what this meant, and was afraid to learn.

She stood near the closed door, wide-eyed, her thin underlip caught between her teeth as the whistler mounted the stairs.

Knuckles rapped.

She turned the knob slowly and dragged the door open to look at her son.

"Walter? What on—? Why are you—?"

His thin dark face wore joviality like a mask. His sharp eyes twinkled.

"Hiya, Mom. Never know when sonny boy's gonna show up, eh?"

"No, Walter," she said tremulously. "I didn't—this is really a—Is anything—?"

"What's a matter?" he said cheerfully. "Got a man in your room? Do I hafta stand out here in the hall?"

"Oh, no, Walter," she said quickly. "Come in. I'm just flustered, I guess."

He came inside, looked at the worn rug, the scarred furniture, the flaking wallpaper.

"Same old crummy joint," he said. He tossed his cap in the direction of a sofa that was leaking cotton at the seams and sat in the rocking chair by the window.

Mr. Bates stood near him, her eyes anxiously fixed on him. She said nothing, but the fingers of one hand moved nervously at the lace around her collar.

Walter glanced up at her and yawned. "Boy, am I tired! Up all night in a stinking day coach full of snoring jerks and squalling brats. I don't know why people have kids. All they do is bawl and slobber."

"You left Pittsburgh last night, Walter?"

"One this morning. Didn't sleep a wink. Look at this suit! New, too."

"I'll press it for you, Walter," she said eagerly.

Walter yawned again. "Okay. My shirt's a wreck, too. Have I got a clean one here?"

"No, Walter. But I'll wash that one out and iron it. Don't—don't you have to be at work tomorrow? It's Monday, you know."

"Sure I—" He broke off, and looked up at her belligerently. "What's a matter, you worried?"

She tried to placate him with a quick, nervous hand, "Oh, no. I just—"

"Then don't 'just'!" he flared. He got up, walked halfway across the room, turned to face her with sullen eyes. "Can't a guy come home to see his mother once in six months?" he demanded. "That's a mother for you. Break your back, sit up all night just to see your mother for one day, and she says first thing you gotta be to work in the morning. How do you like that!"

Her eyes suddenly held a sheen of threatening tears. Her lip

trembled a little. "I'm sorry, Walter. I always seem to say the wrong thing. But I've missed you so, and was so worried about—"

"Well, don't worry so much," he snapped. "It makes me nervous. Anything to eat in the joint?"

She was suddenly eager again. "Yes, you must be starved. You make yourself comfortable, Walter, and I'll fix you some lunch. I won't be but a minute."

She went into the small kitchen and ruefully eyed the larder. She had one pork chop she was going to fix for her lunch, and a few potatoes, two or three slices of bread and a dab of butter. Not much for a boy with Walter's appetite. If she'd only known he was coming, she'd have tried to get a chicken. Walter always loved her fried chicken. And Mr. Penucci would have let her have one on credit.

She set about preparing lunch for one.

Walter took off his coat and shoes and stretched out on the couch. He wriggled first this way and that to avoid sharp springs.

"God!" he muttered in disgust. He lit a cigarette, looked around for an ash tray, and tossed the match in a corner. He flicked ashes on the thin, faded rug at intervals, and stared at the pocked ceiling.

Mrs. Bates poked her gray head through the kitchen doorway.

"Come—" she began tentatively, and suddenly her whole demeanor changed. "Come and—come and get it!" she cried gaily.

Walter grunted, got off the couch,

and went into the kitchen. He eyed the food set out for him, and said nothing.

"I know it isn't much," his mother said, "but it's all I had in the house. Here, dear, sit down." She pulled out a straight-backed chair.

She sat across from him, and watched him eat. She smiled tenderly. "Tell me about your job, Walter," she said brightly.

"Never mind about me," he said shortly, "How're *you* doin'?"

She sighed. She gave him a wistful smile. "Well, I try not to complain, Walter. But things aren't easy. Prices high, costs going up all the time—even on this old house. Honest, I don't know what I'm going to do if things don't get—"

He wagged his fork at her and spoke around a mouthful of pork chop. "You had some bonds Poppa left you. You had about two thousand dollars in bonds he left you. You still—"

"I'm trying to tell you, Walter," she broke in. "Things haven't been easy and—"

"Always the poor mouth!" he sneered. "Every time I see her she's puttin' on the poor mouth."

"I'm just saying things aren't easy, Walter," she pleaded.

"And for me you think it's a picnic?" he demanded. "I got troubles too. All year, work like crazy. And for what, for what?"

He mopped his plate with a slice of bread and glared at his mother.

"A man must work, Walter," she said gently.

"A man must work, Walter!" he mimicked. "Aaaaah!"

Mrs. Bates straightened her bony shoulders, and she looked steadily at Walter. Her voice was quiet, and calm, and possessed of dignity.

"Yes, Walter, a man must work. Work and live like a person, so that he can sleep at night and not worry about—about—"

"Yeh?" he said. "About what?"

"About a bell ringing at night, Walter. Or a knock on the door in the morning. Or someone touching you on the arm. Yes, it's a nice feeling and a free feeling to be able to walk down the street in the sun and look a man in the eye without fear."

Walter jumped suddenly to his feet and pounded the table. His eyes were hard and bright.

"Shut up, shut up!" he yelled. "I ain't in trouble again, so stop mouthing at me! Always mouthing at me."

MRS. BATES worried her underlip with her fingers.

"Walter, you haven't— You know what the judge said last time. He was nice. He gave you another chance. He saw you were really a good boy—and you *are* a good boy, Walter—and he gave you another chance. He got you a nice job and you promised to—you mustn't—" She hesitated, then asked with a sort of eager despair: You *are* all right, Walter? You're not in—"

"A meat ball!" he said furiously. "A herring on a plate! All your life you're a tomcat in the garbage.

Find a fish head and say thank you, mister. Chew a fishgut and smile pretty. Not for me! You take a chance and you throw away the fish heads. You get one break and you're out of the garbage can for life. You're through with time clocks and shiny pants. You're in the higher brackets and nobody gets you. You're a mister, with a future. You hold your nose when you walk through the day coach to your compartment. You leave the stinks behind and the porter dusts the air in front of you. That's for me!"

She raised a tentative hand, trying to stop this flow of what seemed to be hysterical fury.

"Walter—"

"You're a jet job in a world of flivvers!" he went on with glowing eyes. "A buck gets you two and two gets you four—"

His voice went up and up. Some of the pans rattled.

"Walter!"

He stopped. His eyes were glazed. He stared around the kitchen as if he had lost his bearings. Then his eyes came gradually into focus and he leaned across the table to speak to her in a hoarse whisper.

"So all right. So I took another chance. I tried to run it up. No dice, Mom. Tomorrow morning I gotta make it good. The books at the office will show and I gotta make it good."

"Oh, Walter!"

Her voice broke, and she buried her face in her veined hands. "How—much?" she asked through her fingers.

"Fifteen hundred," he said flatly.

She raised her face. "Fifteen hundred—dollars?" she whispered.

"Not clam shells. By midnight tonight. If I miss that twelve-twenty train for Pittsburgh, it's all up. I might as well take gas."

She turned her eyes away to stare dully at the wall. "Fifteen hundred. Where am I to get it, Walter?"

"The bonds. You got the bonds left."

Mrs. Bates' lips curved upward at the corners, but it wasn't a smile. It wasn't even close to a smile.

"How do you think I got you out of your last trouble, Walter? Bribes, bail, paying back—every dime! Where do you think I got it?"

His voice became ugly. "Don't give me that. You're holding out." He reached across the table and took her thin arm between his fingers. "You gotta help me!"

"I'll give you my life, Walter, but—" She tried to pull away. "My arm. You're hurting me."

He tightened his grip. "I'll get ten years. You heard the judge last time."

She began to cry. Not from the pain.

"What can I do?" she sobbed. Tears ran from her wide-open eyes down channels in her cheeks and fell on to the kitchen table. "What can I do?"

"Ten years in stir," he said urgently. "It won't be no reform school this time. Think it over."

Mrs. Bates cried noisily. Suddenly he took his hand away

from her arm and pleaded with it. He laid down his fork and held out his other hand, both of them slightly cupped, palms upward. His forehead glistened under little globules of sweat.

"Please, please, Momma," he said. "Get me the money, Momma. I'll be good, I'll work hard, I won't give you no more trouble. Please, Momma, please!"

"Where can I get it, Walter?" she asked brokenly. "I have nothing left. Nothing . . ."

His mouth twisted into a snarl again. "I don't care where you get it," he growled. It's your fault and you gotta help me!"

Mrs. Bates stopped crying.

"Yes," she said dully, "it's my fault. You're right there, Walter. I always shielded you, made your decisions. But I can't protect you now. I'll give you the few dollars I have. Go away. It will be enough to help you run away. That's all I can do."

Walter got up from the table and walked over to the window in his stocking feet. He stared down at garbage cans in an areaway, watched a lean black cat dab at the lid of one for a few seconds before it gave up and leaped away. He turned to face his mother.

"Not me," he said quietly, with bitter realization. "I ain't going to spend my life being a clay pigeon. You said it awhile ago. Always lookin' over your shoulder, waitin' for a bell to ring at night, takin' back streets. Not for this baby. I'm gonna live. And—" He strode across the small room, grabbed his mother by

the shoulders, jerked her out of the chair and glared at her. "And you're gonna fix it. You're holdin' out on me. I know, see? You've put dough away to keep you in a cushy—"

He broke off as the door in the living room opened. He took his hands away. He watched the kitchen door like an animal, slightly crouched, ready to attack or run away.

Mrs. Bates fought to bring her breathing back to normal.

The man in the doorway was old and mild, with curly gray hair, soft eyes, and the general friendliness of an old dog who has learned that barking, in the long run, is wasted effort. He wore a shiny black suit, and his shirt, though clean, was frayed. He smiled gently, and his voice was gentle, too.

"I—hope I'm not intruding?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Chalmers," Mrs. Bates said a little breathlessly, "come in. This is my son, Walter." To Walter, she said as if in apology: "Mr. Chalmers lives in the back bedroom."

The tone of Mr. Chalmers' voice was like a warm handclasp. "How do you do, Mr. Bates? I feel that I know you very well. Your mother and I sit here in the kitchen sometimes over a cup of tea, and she will talk about you for hours." He scanned Walter with his soft dark eyes.

"Yes, I can see why mother is so proud of you. You're a fine-looking young man."

"Yeah?" Walter said.

"Mrs. Bates," Mr. Chalmers said

to the old woman, "I'm just going out to buy my paper. I may be out for an hour or two. I rather think that little man with the tiny mustache, you know whom I mean, the insurance agent, may call again to collect. Would you please tell him to go away? And not come back?"

"Yes, Mr. Chalmers."

"Thank you, Mrs. Bates. I don't want to pay any more on the policy. You remember I told you my nephew was very sick in Spokane?"

"Yes, Mr. Chalmers."

"Well, the poor young man died."

Mr. Chalmers was quiet for a moment. "Yes. I was going to leave him a few dollars when I died. But now—well, I have no one left at all, and—well, a dollar a week . . . You'll tell that to the little man with the tiny mustache?"

"I'm sorry about your nephew," Mrs. Bates murmured.

Mr. Chalmers shrugged his thin shoulders. "I, too, of course, but only in the sense that there is sorrow always in the death of the young. Living things should be allowed to ripen, and mature, and then be able to look back across the years with pleasure and satisfaction, and so face the inevitable tolling of the bell like one who wraps the mantle of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams." Wordsworth, I believe."

Mr. Chalmers sighed. "Ah, well. Thank you again, Mrs. Bates. Good day, Mr. Bates."

He turned and left. Mrs. Bates stared after him for a moment. Walter's face wore a thoughtful ex-

pression.

Mrs. Bates turned to him suddenly. "I have forty dollars in the house for the rent," she said desperately. "You can take that. Drop me a card when you get settled someplace. Let me know where you are. I'll send you some more as soon as I get it. Maybe later I'll be able to straighten it out. Maybe later I'll be able to speak to your boss. But now you must go away, before—"

"Wait a minute, Ma," Walter interrupted. He sat down again at the table, put his elbows on it, put his chin in his hands. His eyes were narrow as he looked at the wall. "Tell me something about Mr. Chalmers, Momma. He in-ter-ests me very strangely . . ."

"Walter," she said with apprehension, "what . . ."

"Don't be so nervous, Momma. We got plenty time. We got till midnight."

IT WAS an hour or so later when they sat in the living room with its worn rugs, flaking wallpaper, scarred furniture. Mr. Chalmers and Mrs. Bates held cups of tea, seated respectively on the cotton-spouting sofa and in the rocking chair. Walter stood, in his stocking feet, nervously smoking and flicking ashes on the floor. His manner, however, was amiable.

"Now suppose you look at it this way, Mr. Chalmers," he said in the voice of an old-time vacuum-cleaner salesman, "you been payin' one buck a week—for how many years?"

Mr. Chalmers' dark eyes clouded

in thought. "Now, let me see. I'd say twenty years would be a conservative estimate."

"All right," Walter frowned as he computed. "At fifty bucks a year, that would be—uh, one thousand bucks you paid in. No?"

Mr. Chalmers smiled. "Yes. One thousand—ah, bucks. This tea, Mrs. Bates, is excellent."

"I'm so glad, Mr. Chalmers," she said. "I'm trying a new brand. I believe it's better than—"

"Forget the tea!" Walter said impatiently. He turned to Mr. Chalmers, and his smile broadened. "Now, let's figger percentages. How many more years you figger to live?"

"Walter!" Mrs. Bates protested.

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Bates," Mr. Chalmers said gently. "After all, I am an old man, and at my age one rather—comes to terms' with Death. It's like the end of a long busy day—life ends at midnight . . . and a new day, on a new plane, begins."

He looked up at the young man with the thin, dark face and the small bright eyes. "Yes, Walter, I think you are on the verge of making a profound observation. My policy is for twenty-five hundred dollars, and in the days that are left to me I certainly shall not be required to pay in as much as I have already paid."

"That's the exact point!" Walter exclaimed. He took two quick puffs from his cigarette and waved it for emphasis, spilling ashes again. "And if you drop it now, will you get anything back? You will not. You

got a straight life with no cash-in value. If you drop the policy now, the insurance company is the winner. But say you live another couple of years. You pay a hundred more. Then say you kick off, and you leave the twenty-five hundred to somebody. Now I ask you," he said rhetorically, "which is the smart move?"

"Walter," his mother protested. "This is a human life you're talking about."

"Oh, Momma, keep outa this! Well, Mr. Chalmers?"

Mr. Chalmers sipped at his tea, added another drop of lemon.

"Yes," he mused, "I should like to think that when I am gone, I shall have left something behind, however ephemeral. 'Mr. Chalmers? Oh, yes, I shall always remember him for this.' It's nice to live on in someone's memory for a little while after we're dead. But, A: I have no one on this world; and B: I must be very frank and tell you that I can no longer afford to pay even the dollar a week. You see, I live on the few—"

Walter waved him to silence. "That's a problem of the most minor importance! For anybody to invest in you now a buck a week would be gilt-edged! I mean, take for instance my mother here. Now suppose you made her the beneficiary. Now suppose she continued to pay the buck a week. I ask you, who could lose on such a deal?"

Walter paused dramatically, waved a silencing hand at Mr. Bates as she opened her mouth, and continued:

"Nobody could lose, that's who.

You get your dearest wish to leave something behind, and sometimes my mother will say: 'Mr. Chalmers? Oh, yes, I'll always remember the old boy for this.' Get the point?"

Mrs. Bates' eyes held a touch of sudden horror, of realization of what was in Walter's mind.

"Oh, no!" she said. "I couldn't. Why, I—"

"Why not, eh?" Walter demanded affably. "It's simple, eh?"

"No, Mr. Chalmers!" she said urgently. "You mustn't—"

"Let Mr. Chalmers decide." Walter's voice was edged with warning, "Eh, Mr. Chalmers? It makes sense, no? It makes everybody happy, no?"

Mrs. Bates was not to be put off by a tone of voice.

"But we're practically strangers," she said insistently.

Walter laughed shortly, pleasantly. "Whadda ya mean, strangers? That's good, that is. Nobody's strangers. We're just little people trying to make each other happy, eh? Eh, Mr. Chalmers?"

"But I don't want him to leave his money to me!" Mrs. Bates said, her voice beginning to rise. She continued to stare at her son with eyes wide with the desire not to believe what she felt was true. "I don't want—"

Walter's face set a little and his eyes hardened, but his voice retained its friendly concern. "Mr. Chalmers can die feeling he didn't waste a buck a week for twenty years, and he'll know he'll live in your memory. That's what he wants. Why shouldn't

he have it? Ain't every man entitled at least to live in somebody's memory?"

"Yes," Mrs. Bates said nervously, "but Mr. Chalmers doesn't have to do that. I'll—I'll think about him anyway. I promise I will. He doesn't have to—"

"So let him say something for himself!" Walter snarled suddenly. "always mouthing!" He turned to the old man who was smiling a little twisted smile into his teacup. "Whadda you say, Mr. Chalmers?"

"You put it so simply, Walter," he said to his cup. "It's very simple that way, isn't it? Yes, I think I shall adopt your suggestion. Mrs. Bates, can you let me have the loan of a dollar?"

"Atta boy, Pop!" Walter said. He dug into his pocket and pulled out some small change. "Let me do the honor on the first one. All in the family, eh?" He counted silver quarters into Mr. Chalmers' hand. "Three quarters, two dimes, and five pennies. Right?"

"Thank you." Mr. Chalmers got to his feet and turned his gentle smile on them. "This has been a most illuminating experience. I shall go now and get my policy, and when the little man comes I shall take care of changing the beneficiary. Thank you again."

He WENT out, and mother and son remained silent for a long time. Walter paced up and down, sunk in thought, and Mrs. Bates followed him with her troubled gaze.

Finally, she said tentatively:

"Walter—"

He grunted, halted his pacing, and grinned down at her.

"Walter, you aren't— Well, what are you planning?"

"Providin' for your old age, Mom. A good boy, eh?"

"Then you're not—"

"Not what?"

She blurted it: "You're not planning anything—wrong?"

"Now, how do you like that?" he demanded of the ceiling. "Here I get the old girl all fixed up so she'll get a couple dimes when the old boy kicks off, and she complains. Always the poor mouth. Aaaagh!"

He spat. "I'm goin' out for a walk!"

He sat on the couch, pulled on his shoes, and picked up his coat and vest.

"But Walter," Mrs. Bates said. "I didn't mean—"

"Nuts! You didn't mean. The hell you didn't mean." He started for the door.

"Wait, Walter. What about your trouble? You—"

"You weren't any help!" he said. "From now on I'll look out for myself."

As he shut the door a small man with a tiny mustache passed him and smiled pleasantly. Walter watched the man go to a door, knock, and heard Mr. Chalmers invite him in. Walter lounged against the wall, smoking, paying no attention to the murmur of voices from Mr. Chalmers' room. When the voices were raised a little, indicating an end of the interview, Walter went

to the end of the hall and stood by the bathroom door until the little man came out and went away.

Walter knocked on Mr. Chalmers' door.

"Well, Walter?" the old man said pleasantly, when he had opened it.

"Thought maybe we could go for a walk, Pop," Walter said. "I'm just kickin' around, and need some exercise. How about it?"

The old man's face lighted with pleasure. "Why, thank you, Walter. It isn't often some young person takes the trouble to ask me to go with them. One moment. I'll get my hat and coat. The day is turning colder, and my blood is thin."

They went outside into a rather bitter wind, and Walter took Mr. Chalmers' arm as they walked along the street.

"I grew up in this neighborhood," Walter said. "Say you really get an education, growin' up on the streets. Learn how to take care of yourself. Look, there's Solly's hardware store. I broke that big window once with a baseball. Solly never did know who done it." He chuckled.

They approached the corner, where red and green traffic lights rhythmically held and released a heavy stream of cars. They stood on the curb, and Walter's eyes scanned the cars approaching the intersection. They brightened as they lighted on a heavy truck and trailer, about half a block away, rolling at high speed. When the truck was thirty feet or so distant, Walter placed his hand flat against Mr. Chalmers' back and shoved.

The old man plunged forward directly in front of the big truck. The driver twisted the wheel, slammed on the brakes. Tires screamed, and the sprinkle of pedestrians turned heads toward this voice of violence.

Mr. Chalmers fell, and his momentum carried him just barely beyond the track of death. He lay quite still as the truck ground to a stop and the driver leaped out.

Walter darted around the front end of the truck and raised Mr. Chalmers to a sitting position.

"It's sure lucky for you I was here," Walter said loudly. "You started to fall, and I shoved you clear. You really had me scared, Pop."

"Had you scared?" the big truck driver said. "What about me? Yep, if you hadn't shoved him, he'd be a dead duck, all right. That was fast thinkin', bud."

A policeman pushed his way through the gathering crowd. "What's going on here?" he asked.

Several of the onlookers gave him the story; Walter had clearly saved the old man's life.

Walter lifted Mr. Chalmers to his feet and helped him to the curb. The cop waved the truck driver to go ahead. "Nobody hurt," he said. "Not worth making out a report." He turned to Mr. Chalmers. "Guess it's a good thing the boy was with you, Mister."

"Yes, I—suppose so," Mr. Chalmers said shakily. "I don't remember falling, but I am subject to such things. I thank you, Walter."

Walter slapped him lightly on the

back. "It's okay, Pop. Glad to do it. Feel like walkin', or do you wanna go home?"

"This experience has naturally shaken my nerves," Mr. Chalmers said. "I feel that I should go to bed for a while."

"Good idea," Walter said, and piloted him toward the house.

"It's very strange," Mr. Chalmers mused. "I was feeling so well. I don't remember starting to fall."

"Well, you was standin' there," Walter said, "and all of a sudden you started to buckle at the knees. I could see you'd fall right in front of that truck, and I was standin' at such an angle I couldn't grab you. So I done what I thought was best, I give you a hell of a shove."

"I am deeply grateful, Walter. Believe me."

"Aw," Walter said. "Wasn't much."

Mrs. Bates was in the hall as they came up the stairs. Her eyes were wide and worried. "I heard a commotion," she said. "I looked out the window and saw you down there. What happened?"

"Your son saved my life, Mrs. Bates," Mr. Chalmers said gently. He related the incident.

Mrs. Bates grew white around the mouth, and she clutched the front of her dress with tense hands.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Walter—"

"Shut up," Walter said quietly. "Come on, Pop, I'll tuck you in."

"Wait!" Mrs. Bates cried. "Mr. Chalmers, there is something I must tell you—"

"Yes, Mrs. Bates? But why are

you so agitated?"

"Mr. Chalmers, listen!" she said urgently. "Walter is really a good boy, it's just that he's been having some trouble lately, and—"

"Oh?" Mr. Chalmers looked at Walter. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Sure, sure," Walter said, pushing him along the hallway. "I'll tell you about it after you have your nap. I'll see you later," he muttered to his mother.

He led the old man to his room. Mrs. Bates watched, white-faced but silent.

WALTER HELPED Mr. Chalmers off with his coat and shoes, on to the squeaking bed, and threw a quilt over him. "Now you go to sleep, Mr. Chalmers. I'll light the heater and turn it down low, so you'll be good and warm."

"Thank you, Walter. You're very kind."

Walter struck a match to the gas heater, winked at Mr. Chalmers, and went back to his mother's room.

He walked over to her and struck her viciously in the face with the flat of his hand.

"So you were gonna tell him!" he snarled. "You were gonna let him know. All right, that's for that!"

He struck her again and she fell over against the wall, sliding slowly to her knees. She looked up at him with agonized eyes.

"Walter, I'm your mother!"

He slapped her hands away. "A hell of a mother, trying to send her

son to the chair."

He struck her in the face again.

"Walter!" she cried.

"I oughta mess up your sad monkey-face for good!" he snarled.

"Don't strike me again, Walter! I can't stand it!"

He stepped back. "Okay. Now listen. Let's put it this way. It's either you or him, and if it's you I don't care whether they get me or not. Understand?"

She nodded mutely.

"So okay. If you even act like you're gonna blab, it's gonna be you. I'm not playin'. I'm in a jam, and I'm gonna get out of it. I got it fixed, and I got till midnight to do it. And you're gonna sit still for it."

"But what—are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Whadda ya think? I'm gonna knock that old guy off, and collect the insurance I got transferred."

"But, Walter, you'll get caught. They'll send you to the electric chair!"

"Not me, they won't. You just leave that to me and don't worry."

Mrs. Bates sat on the floor. "Don't worry!" she said. "My own son a murderer! And he asks me not to worry! I won't let you do it!"

Walter came close to her again. He drew back his open hand, and she cringed away from him.

"I told you, it was you or him. You're not gonna bother me, even if I have to tie you up. You gonna be quiet?"

"Don't hit me," she whispered. "I'll be quiet, God help me!"

Walter's voice became more friendly. "That's the stuff, Mom! I know you always keep your word. Look at it this way. The old guy ain't got much longer to live, anyway. Why, just a little while ago, he fell down in the street."

"You pushed him!" she accused in a low, dull voice. "You tried to kill him."

"Me? You're nuts. I got witnesses I saved his life. But anyway, he's not got long, and such livin' as he'll do shouldn't happen to a dog. In this crummy joint, cold all the time, no place to go, nobody to talk to, that's a hell of a life. I'll be doin' him a favor, knockin' him off. He'll be grateful for us gettin' him outa his misery."

"Walter, you're talking about a human life as if it were nothing at all."

"So what is it?" he snarled. "What kind of a life does anybody have if he ain't got dough? I don't want that kind of a life, growin' old in a cheap room. God, the people like that I've seen. Lonely old men, lonely old women, ekeing out the tag ends of their lives in boarding houses. By God, it'd be the kindest thing in the world to kill 'em all. They never had much to live for, any time, and then in their old age they got nothin' at all. Not for me, not for little Walter. I see the main chance and I take it."

Mrs. Bates said nothing. She stared at the floor, and plucked at a frayed thread of the carpet.

"So you're just gonna sit still till it's done," Walter resumed. "It's

almost dark now, and he's probably pretty sound asleep. We'll wait a while till I'm sure, then I'll do it. So he'll be dead in plenty time for me to catch my train. You can cash in on that policy, borrow on it if you have to, and wire me the money I need, in the morning."

Walter put his ear against Mr. Chalmers' door. He could hear nothing. He opened it quietly. Now the sound of the old man's rhythmic breathing came to him.

He felt his way across the dark room, with its tightly-closed windows, toward the faint glow of the gas heater.

He knelt and blew out the flame, then turned the valve on until the escaping gas made a gentle hissing. He went toward the black rectangle of the doorway, and stumbled against a chair. He froze.

Mr. Chalmers muttered unintelligibly, then resumed his quiet breathing.

Walter cursed the economy that provided no hall lights, and crept into the hall. He pulled the door shut soundlessly, and went back to his mother's room.

She was now in the rocking chair. She did not turn as he entered, but continued to stare at nothing out the window. Walter gave her only a fleeting glance before he lay down on the couch. He tried to compose himself and relax, but his hands twitched, his eyes darted about the room.

He got up and paced the floor. He lay down again for a moment. He got up. He went into the kitchen and gulped a large glass of water,

spilling some in his eagerness to pour it down his throat.

Mrs. Bates had no coherent thoughts. She felt only a vast and nameless despair. Whenever her mind veered toward the subject of her son or Mr. Chalmers, she shuddered slightly.

It seemed to her that ages had gone by when the knock sounded on the door. Walter sprang toward it, threw it open.

Mr. Chalmers!" Mrs. Bates exclaimed. "Oh, thank God, thank God! You're all right?"

Mr. Chalmers stumbled into the room. "Head," he mumbled thickly. "Hurts. Gas in my room." He fell on to the couch. "Thought Walter

"Sure, I'll fix it!" Walter gritted through clenched teeth. "I'll really fix it." He glared at the old man leaning back on the couch. "God, are you lucky!"

"Take—flashlight," Mr. Chalmers said. "Very dark."

Walter whirled, strode out, slamming the door behind him.

"Oh, thank God, thank God!" Mrs. Bates said over and over.

"Lucky," Mr. Chalmers said, "I didn't turn on lights. Remembered all light switches spark. Too much gas in there. Did Walter—"

A violent explosion rocked the house. Dishes fell in the kitchen, and Mrs. Bates was thrown from her rocking chair.

She paid no heed, but sat still while voices began to sound outside.

Over and over, she continued: "Oh, thank God, thank God!"